broad variations of construction and metals used, each steamboat's whistle makes a one-of-a-kind sound. In a bygone era, those who lived and worked on the river could tell which boat was approaching as much from the sound of her whistle as from her shape and coloring.

Originally, steamboats communicated with each other by ringing their roof bells; but around 1840 whistles became the main source of communication between river vessels. Pilots and captains "conversed" with other boats by the number and duration of whistle blasts, thereby allowing others to know the intentions of the passing vessel. Though Citizen Band radios became commonplace on boats several years ago, whistles are still heard on both newer and older vessels.

A single long whistle blast announces departing or that boats intend to pass on their port (left) sides. Passing on the starboard (right) sides warrants two long blasts, and three short blasts signal operating astern (backwards). The whistle on the "Belle" is part of her original equipment, and it is as resonant now as it was when it was new. When under full steam, the Belle's whistle sounds a deep F-major chord.

The Calliope

The first calliope was designed in 1855 to replace the bells that summoned worshippers to church, but it later became well-known as the advertising tool of the circus show and showboats. The name was chosen by the builder and was derived from the Seventh Greek Muse from mythology. As the story tells us, Calliope was noted for her eloquence and beautiful voice.

Excursion boats adopted the calliope to attract passengers and to announce when a cruise was to commence - an important feature in mid-Twentieth Century rural America when the people who would become passengers often lived many miles from towns and landings and had limited forms of written communication. The "Belle's" calliope sounds can travel as far as 5 miles.

The instrument is basically a 32-note pipe organ under steam pressure. Its range is from one octave below Middle "C" to one-and-one-half octaves above. Each key on the keyboard opens a steam valve and a valve in the appropriate whistle, and as steam is forced into the whistle, that note is sounded. The keyboards on early calliopes were mechanically attached to the whistles; so it required a great deal of pressure from the calliopist's hands to press a key on the keyboard, thereby tightening a cable which opened the whistle's valve. In later years, modern technology introduced a system by which an electrical impulse opened the valve, and though playing the calliope still requires substantial hand strength to create sound, the effort is greatly reduced from mechanical versions of an earlier time.

When the "Belle" (then the "Avalon") was purchased at auction, the boat's original calliope had been auctioned separately; so a "temporary" air-powered calliope was positioned prominently on the roof from 1963 to 1966. As it was temperamental, however, and often out of order, a new electrically-operated one was built for the "Belle" in 1966 by Ernest J. Wilde of Cincinnati, Ohio, to take the place of the less-dependable model on top of the boat. Though the whistles were replaced in 1988 by the Indiana Steam Music and Manufacturing Company of Peru, Indiana, the keyboard is original.

From 1966 to 1989 the calliope and keyboard were attached, and the calliopist was protected from the steam by a clear plexiglass barrier. While the whistles still remain in their original location, in 1989 a recessed "closet" was constructed at the stern end of the Texas Cabin to accommodate the keyboard for the boat's calliope. Now under the Texas Deck roof instead of on it, the keyboard is subjected less to sun and rain, and the calliopist can play rousing period melodies even in inclement weather.